

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for downloading substantially up to date versions of selected software from a plurality of software vendors over a network and for installing the software to a hardware unit, the network comprising a first software handling machine configured to execute a download manager, a second software handling machine configured to execute a download supervisor and a plurality of download servers for downloading software from the plurality of vendors, the method comprising:

associating a transaction identifier with selection data comprising a software selection;

sending a download transaction request comprising the transaction identifier from the download manager to the download supervisor;

determining, by the download supervisor, whether the requested download transaction is authorized;

assembling, by the download supervisor, a download/installation instruction comprising substantially up-to-date software access information for the software selection, if the transaction is determined to be authorized;

communicating the download/installation instruction from the download supervisor to the download manager; and

performing a download and installation of the software selection to the hardware unit by the download manager pursuant to the download/installation instruction.

2. The method of claim 1 wherein the transaction identifier comprises a serial number.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the software access information comprises a network address for a download server.
4. The method of claim 1, wherein the first software handling machine comprises the hardware unit.
5. The method of claim 1, wherein the download manager is configured to execute in a boot sequence of the first software handling machine.
6. The method of claim 5, wherein the download manager loads from a removable storage media.
7. The method of claim 4, wherein the first software handling machine comprises a personal computer.
8. The method of claim 1, wherein the download manager is configured to launch from the hardware unit.
9. The method of claim 8 wherein the download manager is configured to launch in a boot sequence of the hardware unit.
10. The method of claim 8 wherein the download manager is preconfigured to send a download transaction request comprising a predetermined selection of software.

11. The method of claim 1, wherein the hardware unit is linked to the first software handling machine by a dedicated communications link.
12. The method of claim 11, wherein the download manager is configured to execute upon detecting that the hardware on the dedicated communications link.
13. The method of claim 12, wherein the hardware unit is linked to the first software handling machine over a network comprising a local area network.
14. The method of claim 12, wherein the network comprises the Internet.
15. The method of claim 1, further comprising storing a record of the download transaction in a central database.
16. The method of claim 1 wherein data comprising the transaction identifier is encrypted.
17. The method of claim 1 wherein the software selection is predetermined.
18. The method of claim 1 wherein the selection data is determined in whole or in part substantially at the time of sale of the hardware unit.

19. The method of claim 1 wherein the selection data is determined in whole or in part in an interactive process.
20. The method of claim 19 further comprising obtaining the selection data by a point of sale application.
21. The method of claim 20 wherein obtaining the selection data by a point of sale application comprises providing an automated kiosk for selecting software and recording the selections for a download transaction.
22. The method of claim 1 wherein the selection data is determined in whole or in part by looking up the transaction identifier in a central database.
23. The method of claim 1 wherein determining whether the download transaction is authorized comprises evaluating the transaction identifier.
24. The method of claim 1 further comprising interrogating the hardware unit to obtain information comprising preexisting software.
25. The method of claim 24 wherein interrogating the hardware unit to obtain information comprising preexisting software comprises executing a Desktop Management Interface.

26. The method of claim 24 further comprising modifying the selection data in response to the information comprising preexisting software.
27. The method of claim 1 wherein the software access information comprises an authentication code for activating or downloading software.
28. The method of claim 27, wherein the authentication code is provided by an authentication subsystem of the download supervisor.
29. The method of claim 1 further comprising storing download transaction data to a central database.
30. The method of claim 29 wherein the download transaction data comprises a download transaction status.
31. The method of claim 29 wherein the download transaction status comprises a transaction hold status.
32. The method of claim 31 wherein communicating a download/installation instruction from the download supervisor to the download manager is held in abeyance while a transaction is in a hold status.

33. The method of claim 1 wherein the software is data comprising music, images, video, and the like.
34. The method of claim 1 wherein the software is data comprising data related to services.
35. A system for downloading software to a hardware unit from a plurality of vendors over a network, the system comprising:
  - a plurality of download servers in the network for downloading software from the plurality of software vendors;
  - a first software handling machine in the network and linked to the hardware unit, the first software handling machine configured to execute a download manager, the download manager adapted to initiate a download/installation transaction comprising selected software to be downloaded to the hardware unit from one or more of the plurality of download servers, to send a transaction identifier in a download transaction request to a download supervisor over the network, and to download and install the selected software to the hardware unit pursuant to a download/installation instruction received in response to the download transaction request; and
  - a second software handling machine in the network configured to execute the download supervisor, the download supervisor adapted to determine whether the download transaction request is authorized, and, if the transaction is determined to be authorized, to assemble a download/installation instruction comprising substantially up-

to-date software access information for the software selection and to send the download/installation instruction to the download manager.

36. The system of claim 35 wherein the software access information comprises an authentication code.

37. The system of claim 35, wherein the download manager is configured to execute on the hardware unit.

38. The system of claim 35, wherein the first software handling machine linked to the hardware unit by an external bus.

39. The system of claim 35, wherein the software access information comprises an authentication code for activating software and a network address for downloading software.

40. The system of claim 35 wherein the software is data comprising music, images, video, and the like.

41. The system of claim 35 wherein the software is data comprising data related to services.

42. A hardware unit configured to execute a download manager capable of downloading and installing selected software from a plurality of software vendors from a plurality of download servers in a network, comprising:

means to initiate the download manager during a boot sequence of the hardware unit;

means to provide a transaction identifier to a download supervisor in the network to enable the download supervisor to identify and validate the download transaction;

means to receive a communication from the download supervisor comprising a download/installation instruction that includes substantially up-to-date software access information for the selected software of the download transaction; and

means to perform the download and installation of the selected software to the hardware unit according to the download/installation instruction.

43. The hardware unit of claim 42 wherein the means to initiate the download manager during a boot sequence of the hardware unit comprises executing a bootstrap loader to establish basic connectivity and download functions for the hardware unit in order to load a program to which the bootstrap loader hand off control.

44. The hardware unit of claim 42 wherein the selected software may be selected or modified by a user in an interactive process.

45. The hardware unit of claim 42 wherein the selected software comprises a predetermined selection.

46. A program comprising a storage medium tangibly embodying program instructions for downloading and installing software to a hardware unit from a plurality of software vendors over a network, the program instructions including instructions operable to cause at least one programmable processor to:

provide a download manager executable on a first software handling machine in the network, the download manager adapted to initiate a download/installation transaction comprising selected software to be downloaded to the hardware unit from one or more of a plurality of download servers in the network, to provide a transaction identifier to identify and validate the download transaction and to perform a download and an installation of selected software to the hardware unit pursuant to a download/installation instruction;

provide a download supervisor executable on a second software handling machine in the network, the download supervisor adapted to evaluate data comprising the transaction identifier to determine whether the download transaction is authorized and, if the transaction is authorized, to communicate a download/installation instruction comprising substantially up-to-date software access information for the selected software from the download supervisor to the download manager;

associate the transaction identifier with the selected software for a download transaction;

send a download transaction request comprising the transaction identifier over the network from the download manager to the download supervisor; and  
perform the download and installation of software to the hardware unit by the download manager pursuant to the download/installation instruction.

47. The program of claim 46, further comprising instructions operable to cause at least one programmable processor to:

cause the download manager to initiate in a boot sequence of the first software handling machine.

48. The program of claim 46, further comprising instructions operable to cause at least one programmable processor to:

cause the download manager to launch from the hardware unit during a boot sequence of the hardware unit.

49. The program of claim 48, further comprising instructions operable to cause at least one programmable processor to:

cause the download manager to be preconfigured for downloading a predetermined software selection.

50. The program of claim 49, further comprising instructions operable to cause at least one programmable processor to:

cause the download supervisor to store a record of the download transaction in a central database.

51. The program of claim 46 wherein the software is data comprising music, images, video, and the like.

52. The program of claim 46 wherein the software is data comprising data related to services.